

Interview Presentation: Perception vs. Reality

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You and the Interviewer May See Things Differently

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In our work as recruiters, we clearly have experienced situations where what we see and what the candidate thinks he is presenting could not be further from each other.

For example, let's say Jeremy waltzes into our conference room and plops himself down in the chair. His hair is a mess and his shirt looks like it needs some spray starch and a hot iron. Jeremy thinks he's presenting a picture of someone who is self-confident, comfortable with himself, not looking too eager about the open position and not intimidated by a couple of recruiters.

His personal grooming choices make his solid qualifications moot, because it's hard to get over his appearance. Our first thought would be that Jeremy is recovering from a late night on the town. His posture indicates his energy is low and his half-closed eyes convey that he is trying (unsuccessfully) to stay awake during the interview. His wardrobe malfunctions reflected a lack of preparation for the important meeting. After all, you only get one chance to make a first impression.

Poor personal grooming and sloppy interview attire can detract from that all-important first meeting. It does not take a lot of time to check your overall interview presentation, and it is definitely worth the effort. Here are some cautionary tales and tips for making a favorable impression.

Interview Advice: Consider How You Look -- and Smell

A colleague once interviewed a woman in her late 20s who made the mistake of unbuttoning too many buttons on her blouse. The young woman thought she looked terrific, but in reality her interview presentation was very distracting. Then there was the promising candidate who scored highly in the phone interview. Impressed by what he heard, the recruiter set up an in-person interview at his office. Imagine his astonishment when the early-30s man walked in wearing a tie with a knot the size of his knee cap. Sadly, this person was not trying to make a fashion statement.

While the visual image you present is important, so is the impact you make through the other senses. Have you ever been in an elevator with someone who applied cologne too liberally? Here is some interview advice: Less is definitely more when it comes to applying a fragrance, particularly in the workplace.

For people who smoke, even more restraint may be necessary. While a smoker may be immune to the smell of nicotine in his clothes, the interviewer sharing the same small space (like an office) may find that odor unpleasant. And if the smoker has tried to mask that smell with mints or perfume, the resulting atmosphere may be downright off-putting.

Pull Your Interview Presentation Together

Enlist the help of someone you trust to review your choices at least a day before your interview. Model

your interview clothes and style your hair just as you would for the interview. Then have this friend critique your appearance. Ask him to be brutally honest about what may need to change.

Next, ask your friend for some job interview advice. Will your nonverbal communication hurt your chances in an interview? Do you absent-mindedly crack your knuckles, jingle loose change in your pocket, or cross your legs and rapidly jiggle your foot? If your friend cautions that your behavior may be distracting, acknowledge the habit, avoid it, and channel that nervous energy toward interview preparation and focus.

Personal Grooming and Presentation Tips

Since you'll probably be shaking hands at some point during the interview, check your fingernails. Are they clean and clipped? Good posture denotes confidence and energy -- how do you carry yourself? If you know you tend to slouch, pretend you have a string attached to the top of your head and it is tied to the ceiling. That string is pulling your head up, keeping your posture straight. And it goes without saying, be sure your hygiene is impeccable.

People do judge a book by its cover, so be sure your interview appearance is picture perfect. The impression you leave should be memorable, but in a good way.

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